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Aging farm population has states experimenting with incentives

OWENSBORO, Ky. (AP) -- Kentucky's farmers are getting older.

The average age of a farmer in Kentucky jumped to 55.2 years from 52.2 in 1987. During that same time frame, the number of farmers under the age of 25 fell to 664 from 1,703, according to the U.S. Census.

And, the number of farmers between the ages of 25 and 34 fell to 4,400 from 10,713 over the last 19 years - figures consistent with other farm states.

And, agriculture experts say, that doesn't bode well for the future of food production. But, several states are experimenting with programs to draw younger farmers back to the fields.

Keith Rogers, executive director of the Gov.'s Office of Agricultural Policy, said the issue, while always a concern in farm communities, has become important enough that states are trying to help young farmers succeed.

In Kentucky, that's taken the form of redirecting funds once used to aide tobacco farmers adjust away from burley to helping develop new and part-

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time farmers as part of the state's Beginning Farmer Loan program.

Rogers, who farmed for 15 years before taking on politics, said the state board approved \$2 million in an effort to improve newcomers' chances.

But, money doesn't solve all the problems, land must be available to buy or rent, said Union County extension agent Rakin Powell. Some Union County farmers have crossed into southern Illinois, while also scouring Henderson, Webster, Hopkins and McClean counties looking for places to grow, Powell said.

"We had one family that went as far as Mississippi," Powell said.

That's in part because farmland is being sold to developers, limiting the acreage available and driving up prices, Powell said.

Finally, steep capital costs for land, equipment and livestock turn off many lenders, Powell said.

Those factors tend to keep younger farmers out of the business, said Randy Saner, an extension agent who runs the University of Missouri's program, Farm Beginnings: Preparing a New Generation of Farmers.

The program offers low-interest loans to farmers, hoping to draw them into growing and away from fields with less financial risks.

"We can train people all we want, but if we don't invest in them, it won't work," Saner said.

Roger Johnson, North Dakota's agriculture commissioner, oversees a beginning farmer loan program, much like Kentucky's. Johnson said the state is seeing increased interest, but as long as farmers operate on slim margins, profits will be thin.

To Johnson, the future of farming may not be food, but fuel. High oil prices could boost ethanol production, creating a new market for farm products that will increase profits, Johnson said.

Cellulose ethanol is now being produced with grass, wheat straw and wood chips, he said. A new facility that will produce 50 million gallons of ethanol a year is being built in central North Dakota.

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"I think there will be lots of opportunities for people to get jobs and start farms where they will be raising cellulose," Johnson said.

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